

VZCZCXRO1654

PP RUEHBC RUEHDA RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK

DE RUEHEG #1901/01 1721001

ZNR UUUUU ZZH

P 211001Z JUN 07

FM AMEMBASSY CAIRO

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5766

INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE

RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD 0189

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 CAIRO 001901

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PREL PREF PGOV PHUM EG I2

SUBJECT: IRAQI REFUGEE NUMBERS IN EGYPT SWELL, UNDER A WATCHFUL EYE

Sensitive but unclassified. Please handle accordingly.

Summary

I1. (SBU) Egyptian authorities are watching cautiously as Iraqi refugee numbers in Egypt approach the 100,000 mark, according to official estimates, amid signs of an increasingly restless Iraqi community. The GOE offers few social services to the Iraqis (similar to other large refugee communities, i.e., Sudanese), leaving them to fend for themselves in private housing, education, and health-care markets. There have been no known cases of forced deportations of Iraqis, but visa issuance has tightened due to security concerns, and residency permission has become a crucial tool of control (and exploitation) by GOE security services. The UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has registered approximately 7,600 Iraqis at its Cairo offices, and very few of these are likely to be resettled to other countries. Distrust of the UN agency may play a role in Iraqis' reluctance to register with the Commission, along with a perception that UNHCR can offer refugees little in the way of services. Still, lack of jobs, rising prices, and other problems associated with a dislocated population, strains are beginning to develop between different Iraqi groups and between Egyptians and Iraqis. A recent GOE rejection of a request by Iraqis to build a Shia mosque in Cairo highlighted these tensions, and revealed deep-seated ambivalence among Egyptians toward their Iraqi brethren. End Summary.

The GOE: Policy and Perspectives

I2. (SBU) According to a senior official at the Egyptian Foreign Ministry, Egypt is hosting approximately 100,000 Iraqis who left their country to escape the war. There are no precise figures on the number of Iraqi refugees in Egypt, however, unofficial estimates range from 60,000 up to 130,000. The majority, he said, hail from middle class neighborhoods of Baghdad, driven out by the threat of violence and the "ethnic cleansing" of various communities. Describing GOE visa policy, MFA Deputy Assistant Minister for Refugee Affairs Tarek Maaty told emboffs that Iraqis must now obtain a visa from an Egyptian embassy prior to travel. Egypt's embassy in Baghdad was essentially closed after the June 2005 kidnapping and murder of its Ambassador, Ihab Sherif. Until recently, Iraqis were able to obtain airport visas upon arrival in Cairo. MFA Assistant Minister for Consular Affairs Mahmoud Aouf told a Parliamentary Committee on April 4, 2007 that the decision (to tighten rules) was "due to the nature of the security circumstances accompanying the entry of Iraqis in Egypt at this stage."

¶3. (SBU) Maaty said that visa issuance must await pre-approval from Cairo security authorities, but that issuance was generous. The length of legal stay in Egypt is determined upon application for entry at the border. There are no cases of forced deportation of Iraqis who entered the country legally, he added. There have been approximately 100 cases over the past six months, he said, where Iraqis arrived without visas and were denied entry. This includes a "handful" of cases involving false documentation by individuals seeking entry. To deal with this issue, a mechanism was recently created, for GOE airport authorities to coordinate with the MFA, the Iraqi Embassy, and the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) to verify bona fides of an individual seeking entry if there are security concerns or problems. The mechanism, Maaty claimed, is "working well."

The Iraqi Embassy View

¶4. (SBU) Iraqi Embassy contacts believe the number of Iraqis in Egypt is closer to 60,000, and suggest the GOE inflates the figure in public for several reasons: seeking credit from the Iraqi government for helping its brother in need, seeking credit from the U.S. and the international community for helping Iraq despite its lack of participation in Operation Iraqi Freedom, and elevating the sense of "vigilance" among Egyptian security forces to counter any potential problems imported by Iraqi Shia refugees. The bulk of the Iraqis reside in and around October 6 City on the northwest suburbs of Cairo, causing housing and real estate prices there to rise precipitously. The Iraqis there are largely self-dependent, relying upon their savings to cover costs of private education and social services that the GOE does not offer them. Embassy contacts do not dispute the GOE

CAIRO 00001901 002 OF 003

line that Iraqis are welcome in Egypt, but complain that they are being exploited by unscrupulous landlords, police, and government officials.

Anecdotes of Iraqis in Cairo

¶5. (U) Mona, an Iraqi Shia from a Sunni neighborhood of Baghdad resides in Cairo with her two daughters, one with a severe mental handicap which she attributed to "chemicals being used in the war on Iraq." She complained to Emboffs that she was unable to locate proper care for her handicapped daughter and must bear the full expense of her family's medical needs. Her husband located steady work in the Emirates in the aircraft engineering field, but he was turned down when he applied for a visa to visit his family in Egypt. The woman said she was granted temporary refugee status from the UNHCR ("yellow card"), and as such cannot depart the country to visit her husband. She said she and her family hoped to be resettled by the UN in a third country. "Many Iraqi families here are in similar circumstances," she concluded.

¶6. (U) Barbara Harrell, a professor at the American University of Cairo involved in refugee issues, told Emboff that funding for education of refugees in Egypt is non-existent. She asserted that Egypt plays host to 130,000 Iraqi refugees. She said that it was a "myth" that these Iraqis all arrived with lots of money, and that many are now running low on funds. "There is no way to get money out of Iraq." There is also no provision for medical care for the Iraqi refugees, many of whom have cancers, special needs, and are traumatized by the conflict that they have escaped. The Iraqis in Egypt are believed to be highly educated and skilled: their skills are being wasted in Egypt, she complained, since they are not allowed to work. There are no sites to dispense welfare funds to Iraqis in Egypt, and Iraqi children are not permitted to use public Egyptian schools,

over-crowded already with Egyptians. The U.S. she said, could help by funding hospitals, schools, and other facilities to aid the Iraqis. Harrell said there was a high level of distrust among the Iraqi population in Egypt toward the UNHCR - an agency they felt was more likely to make trouble, than assist them.

17. (U) Ray Jureidini, another professor at AUC, discussed the role of the UNHCR and the status of Iraqis in Egypt. He said the organization routinely extended refugee status for any Iraqi resident in Egypt, allowing them to enroll their children in private schools. Most Iraqis, with the exception of those from the North, are given *prima facie* refugee status by UNHCR. But, he complained, the UNHCR is slow to process applications and is widely distrusted by the Iraqi population. As a result, he added, the number of Iraqi refugees registered with the UNHCR in Cairo is only a small percent of the Iraqi population in Egypt. He believed the Iraqi refugees in Egypt were providing benefits to the Egyptian economy, and have begun to create communities and support networks of their own. Jureidini confirmed that the GOE does not offer them education, health-care, or employment - challenges it can not meet for its own citizens. For the GOE, the needs of refugee communities in Egypt is the responsibility of the UNHCR (security issues accepted). Those caught in illegal status in Egypt, he said, are permitted to remain in the country, provided they pay penalties. Some are referred to the UNHCR, which routinely registers them as refugee applicants, providing them with legal status to remain in Egypt.

Worries over Shia-Sunni Conflict

18. (U) President Mubarak, in a telling 2006 interview with al Arabiya TV, broadcast his deep personal distrust of all Shi'ites when he questioned their national loyalties. The largely Sunni Egyptian population generally shares the regime's outlook on this subject, despite Egypt's close historical links to Shia Islam. The issue continues to be a key concern of both the Egyptian government and public, and guides GOE policy towards the growing Iraqi refugee community. According to local press reporting, 7,000 Iraqi Shiites recently petitioned the Egyptian government for permission to construct a Shiite mosque in the October 6 City suburb of Cairo, citing Article 46 of the Egyptian constitution which guarantees the "freedom of belief and freedom to practice religious rites." The group reportedly threatened to refer the issue to the "A'al Al Bayt Supreme Council" (a religious council in Egypt for Shiites). According to local contacts, the move added to already

CAIRO 00001901 003 OF 003

heightened to GOE fears that the Iraqi community would set off a "fitna," or clash in Egypt between the two primary Islamic sects, attracting fanatics from both sides in the process. Prime Minister Nazif recently rejected the request to build the mosque. The Iraqi Charge in Cairo, according to media reports, called for calm from the Iraqi community and requested they not cause trouble with the GOE. With few places for the Shia to worship in Cairo, the issue is certain to remain contentious.

JONES